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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS

PARTICIPANTS: Sargel Vishnevsky, Pravda Columnist;  
Jack F. Matlock

DATE, TIME: October 11, 1983; 12:30-1:45 P.M.;  
AND PLACE: "The Buck Stops Here" Cafeteria

Background: Vishnevsky, whom I had met during my tours in Moscow, telephoned October 7 to say that he was in the U.S. for a few weeks (ostensibly to replace temporarily the Pravda correspondent in New York, who has terminal cancer) and would like a meeting, completely off the record. After consulting Judge Clark, I agreed to meet with him for lunch on October 11.

Vishnevsky's Comments: Though his presentation was rather disjointed, he made the following points of possible interest, presenting everything as his "personal view:"

-- The state of U.S.-Soviet relations has deteriorated to a dangerous point. Many in the Soviet public are asking if war is imminent. He himself is worried and personally uncomfortable because now he must write nothing but propaganda about the U.S. rather than the more objective stories he prefers, and was permitted to write in the mid-70's.

-- The Soviet Union is now run by a triumvirate of Andropov, Ustinov and Gromyko. They have been in the leadership so long that they tend to be rigid about basic policy issues. (In this regard, he observed, "President Reagan is mentally and physically ten years younger than his age; our leaders are ten years older.") But the Soviet leaders recognize that they need a decrease in tension to concentrate on economic reform (he spoke of the economy as being "a total mess, and getting worse"), but are frustrated because they feel beleaguered and simply don't know how to proceed.

-- Andropov's statement of September 28 was virtually unprecedented and is a reflection of the leadership's current frustration. It was intended primarily for the Soviet audience (to warn them that they could not expect an easing of tensions with the U.S. and had to be prepared to tighten their belts) and to "our friends in Europe" (the anti-nuclear movement). But the leadership is convinced that the Reagan Administration is out to bring their system down and will give no quarter; therefore they have no choice but to hunker down and fight back.

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-- Their frustration is heightened by a recognition that the President is in fact successful in achieving his objectives. His defense budgets get passed; the NATO Alliance is holding; the U.S. economy is picking up. And he constantly outmaneuvers them; the President's handling of the KAL "incident" was "absolutely brilliant": it left the Soviet leaders "wallowing in the mud."

-- The Soviets know that we will succeed in starting INF deployments, and are convinced that the President is very likely to be reelected next year. He implied, however, that their current mood was so truculent and their prestige so much at stake that they are unable to draw the logical conclusions from these convictions.

-- As for the future, his parting words were that, in his opinion, the Soviets would stonewall all our proposals this fall and would have to react in some fashion to INF deployments, which would require a stonewall well into 1984. However, "about six months into the next year" they might be willing--since the domestic economy remains the priority issue for them--to reassess their stance.

Matlock Comments: Vishnevsky did most of the talking during lunch, but I pointed out repeatedly that the Soviet predicament, as he described it, was the direct result of their own actions and their own aggressive policies, and not of propaganda manipulation on our part. (He did not disagree.) I told him they could not have handled the KAL massacre worse. (He agreed.) I stressed that, despite everything, we were still prepared to negotiate seriously to lower arms levels and had made proposals which should interest them, if they indeed do desire a reduction of tension. (This elicited his comments implying that the Soviet leadership, at the moment at least, is incapable of considering them rationally.)

In response to his comment that the Soviet leaders are convinced that they could not deal with this Administration, I told him that Soviet actions across the board created grave doubts that we could deal with the Soviets. All Soviet actions and their propagandistic and one-sided "proposals" seemed designed to acquire or perpetuate Soviet military superiority. There could obviously be no agreements on this basis, and so long as these Soviet policies persisted, we could not take seriously Soviet professions of a desire to improve relations.

Comment: Vishnevsky has held key positions with Pravda for many years, so he clearly has sound Party and (almost certainly) KGB credentials. His trade is propaganda and his specialty the U.S. We must assume that, in general, he was conveying a series of messages someone in the regime wants us to hear. He was so intent on getting his comments off his chest that he carefully avoided debating any points I made, either agreeing with them or letting them pass. There is obviously a heavy potential here for disinformation, and his comments must be treated with caution. Nevertheless, I would summarize the real messages he tried to convey as the following:

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-- Expect a Soviet stonewall for about nine months, but do not conclude from this that we cannot do business at all in 1984.

-- There are still powerful incentives in Moscow to deal realistically with us, but these may not be evident in the months ahead because of the psychological and prestige factors cited.

-- Andropov is not in complete control: he shares power with Ustinov (the military) and Gromyko (a stalwart of traditional Soviet foreign policy with a large personal stake in it). Changing policies will not come easy.

If this was the intended message, then it may well be essentially accurate, since there is much corroborative evidence. And if this is the case, it means that we are on the right track and must make sure we stay the course, while keeping channels of communication open.

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